

Beverage of Champions: *Sana/Soma* among the Narts

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For Kilgore Trout and R. Gordon Wasson

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Notes

Tales about the Narts belong among the gems of world epic literature. The Narts, from the North Caucasus, were giants who preceded humans on earth. They had superhuman strength and magical powers, and also a drink called *sana*. References to this beverage suggest that *sana* was the *soma* described rapturously in Indian and other sources. *Soma* and its ritual use is considered a component of early Indo-European culture. Thus its appearance in folktales from the Caucasus, among Ossetians, Circassians, Abkhazians and their neighbors, is not surprising (1).

Among the celebratory beverages mentioned in different versions of the Nart sagas, we find wine, beer ("foaming ale"), and "honeyed mead," in addition to what we believe to be a hallucinogenic beverage which so delighted Sosruquo in the episode cited below. This particular substance—in the description of it and its effects—was different from the others. Most of the references to *sana* (by that name) are very brief, and only attest to the presence of the beverage at celebrations (2). Another type of reference goes beyond mere attestation, and describes how *sana* was stolen from the gods and acquired by humans. A final group of references has details about the name *sana* and its connection to Lady

Satanaya and others. Additionally, the sagas contain a few references to a *soma* symbol or substitute, the magical red apple and its broth, with their astonishing properties. Let us examine the more extensive references in greater detail.

The first reference of interest describes humankind's early knowledge of *sana*, the ambrosia-like beverage of the gods. A Nart hero named Sosruquo was able to steal a barrel of it, thereby making it available to ordinary folk. The tale, or saga, which is quoted and summarized below, has much in common with the Greek myth describing how Prometheus stole fire. It is quite interesting that the renowned classicist and ethnobotanist Carl A. P. Ruck, in his study "Prometheus as Shade-Foot and the Theft of Fire," associated Prometheus' theft of "fire" with the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom (3) (popularly known as the fly-agaric mushroom), the supposed *soma*. The Nart story about Sosruquo seems to support Ruck's hypothesis.

How Sosruquo Brought *Sana* to the Narts

The gods, we are told, used to gather on the top of Mount Elbruz to drink *sana*. It was their custom, once a year, to invite a meritorious human to participate. In this account, the choice falls on the hero Sosruquo, who is brought before them.

"Try our *sana*, my boy," said the leader. "You are the one who stands [out] before the [other] Narts in courage and strength. The people who are on the earth do not have *sana* like this." Having said this, the leader handed the horn full of *sana* to Sosruquo. Immediately Sosruquo drained the horn, his heart grew glad, and the world appeared brighter to him. "Aha, now go to the earth and tell all the people what our *sana* is like," said Psat'ha.

But although the gods spoke thus, Sosruquo remained where he was, standing. He marveled infinitely at the *sana*. He began to see the earth as more beautiful and his strength as increasing.

"O gods, if it is possible, give me yet another hornful. What marvelous *sana* this is!"

"It will not be possible, we cannot change our custom; it is a single horn that we give mortals to drink," said the leader.

Tlepshw loved Sosruquo. Being pleased with him, he spoke thus: "We will give him yet another horn to drink. He deserves it. He will tell the people even better than the others how our *sana* is."

"We will give him another horn to drink," said T'ha'wolej. "We will do as you wish. But if we change our custom, will the god of the gods forgive us?"

"He will forgive us," said all the gods.

After that, the jester god of the forest took the horn and approached the barrel holding the *sana*. And Sosruquo followed him and went near the barrel. Mazit'ha said, "This barrel belongs to the great god. And our *sana* is in it."

"What a marvelous barrel it is," said Sosruquo. "The marvel is not the barrel," said T'ha'wolej, entering their conversation. "It is what adheres to the bottom of the barrel that is marvelous. It is the seed of the *sana*. And it is my strength that causes the *sana* to ripen." When Sosruquo heard these things, he went to the barrel, and while pretending to look at it, he seized the barrel, threw it down Mount Elbruz, and caused it to fall to the plain. "Not just one man, but let all the people drink the *sana* of the gods!" When the barrel reached the plain, it broke, and the sweet *sana* overflowed like water and descended to the land of the Narts. And when the seed, which adhered to the bottom of the barrel, entered the earth, it immediately grew and increased. When the people saw the *sana* plant with its sweet bunches, they did not know what to do with it and brought the bunches to the wise Satanaya.

Just at that moment Sosruquo returned. The strong *sana* that he had drunk had greatly increased his strength. "It is this from which the gods extract their wonderful drink. Today they gave it to me to drink on top of Elbruz."

Satanaya immediately attended to the matter. She put the bunches in a barrel, and on the lid she placed the Abra stone. Before a year had passed, the *sana* had matured and fermented, and it even threw off the lid on which the Abra stone sat. When the Narts drank the *sana*, it made them feel pleased with the world. Thanks to Sosruquo, the *sana* of the gods came into the possession of the people (4).

In the different cultures that may have used *soma*, references to it always seem to be vague, poetical, partly veiled and mysterious. In the Nart episode above, there also is some mystery. Is a mushroom or a plant being described? The mention of a special residue growing on the bottom of the barrel suggests a fungus of some kind. The "seed" which enters the earth and immediately grew and increased *could* represent mushroom mycelium spreading underground. Yet *sana* is also described as a plant "with sweet bunches." Lady Satanaya prepares more *sana* over the course of a year in a barrel which is said to mature and "ferment."

Sana/Soma appears again in another group of references connected with Lady Satanaya, the grand matriarch of the sagas, who is a presence among all generations of the Narts, prominent in the early cycles of the epic, remote and dim at the end. She is the Narts' prophetess, seer, inventor, healer and herbalist. Her name itself is connected with *sana*, and she is sometimes styled "Lady Nart Sana" (Saga 26) (5). Saga 48 begins, "She, who is called Lady Satanaya, her name is Satanaya—Sana is her name. And they say 'Satanaya' because of this: 'I give the name Satanaya to this flower,' she said, pointing to the flower Nart Sana. Sana, this was her name" (6). Sana is also mentioned as a place name (7).

In these tales, the magical red "apple" also seems reminiscent of *soma*

Lady Setenaya and the Magic Apple

The golden tree of the Narts had many powers. Once each year, at the very top of the tree, an apple would sprout. For six months it would grow and slowly ripen, and during the next six months it would gradually shrink. In appearance and size it was not like the other apples that ripened in one day. This apple always grew bigger, rounder, and firmer than the others.

Over a long time the Lady Setenaya had been able to discover what powers lay within this special apple. When the first frost came and the leaves fell from the trees, she would pick the apple and set it in a wooden chest. So Setenaya kept this apple for the Narts and used it in

her ministrations to their sick, for many things can befall a person in this life, and sometimes he fares well and other times poorly

The person who tasted of this magical apple would grow gentle in heart and compassionate and would not grow older, but as the years passed would grow younger instead. That apple would add to the span of a man's life as many years as he had already lived.

No one ever said that Lady Setenaya grew old or became unsteady in her step or that her face ever bore a wrinkle. And in truth how could they? For Setenaya never grew old!

She would smear on her face the pulp from the core of the apple, which was like fresh butter. Thus her face would become white, clean, and so shiny that like a mirror you could see your reflection in it. She would also boil the apple's skin and make a broth, which when drunk would make your heart grow happy and your spirit turn tender and compassionate (8).

The references above all have been drawn from English translations of Nart sagas, found in the languages of the North Caucasus. The tales, which have an undeniable antiquity, were collected and first written down in the 19th-20th centuries, that is to say, relatively recently. There is also a most interesting Armenian reference to a Lady Sat'inik (Satanaya/Shaytana/Satana), and possibly to one of the beverages called *sana*, in a much earlier work, the *History* attributed to Movses of Khoren, written and/or compiled in the 5th-8th centuries. The passage in question relates to festivities accompanying the marriage of an Alan princess, daughter of the Alan king, with an Armenian king Artaxias/Artashes. The incident (if this is history and not legend) took place at their wedding breakfast some time in the first century A.D. (A.D. 36 or 72 have been proposed):

"But," they say "queen Sat'inik had great desire for the vegetable *artakhur* and the shoot *tits'* from the table of Argavan." MX I. 30, p. 122 (9).

Already in 1929, the linguist Georges Dumézil suggested a connection, generally, between the various references to Satinik in Movses of Khoren and to Satana and other figures in the Nart tales, as well as to ancient motifs about the Scythians found in Herodotus' *History* (5th century B.C.) (10). In 1986, the British Armenist Charles Dowsett published a fascinating article, which summarized the scholarship on the issue. He concluded, strangely, that what Satana "craved" or "longed for" at her wedding breakfast was not a plant or herb, but a type of headdress (11). Based on the material examined in the present essay, we disagree. To us, it seems more likely that Satana wanted to celebrate her marriage with the beverage *sana*.

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The few references to *sana* described above suggest the presence among the Narts of a beverage which was not wine or beer, and probably was hallucinogenic. More than that, however, little can be said. Testimony from the Nart sagas has the same mysterious quality characteristic of references to *soma* in other cultures. No reference to *soma* in any culture provides a recipe. Wasson and his colleagues determined that the substance they were investigating was a non-alcoholic hallucinogenic intoxicant (12). However, the sources examined here do not permit us to say that any of the concoctions called *sana* were not fermented and did not contain alcohol. The beverage *soma* is deliberately mysterious, and its constituent parts probably varied from society to society, based on the entheogens available. It is doubtful if the 19th-century reciters of the Nart sagas knew what the ambrosia-like substance being described was—or would have told, if they did know. Nonetheless, they do characterize it as different from their other beverages.

Whether the magic ingredient in this brew was the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom is not known, and probably is not knowable, based on currently available written sources. However, the mushroom in question *is* found in the Caucasus and Asia Minor to the present day. From remote antiquity to the present, it would have been investigated by residents, first, as a natural and available food source. Subsequent experiences would have given it the reputation it has acquired in folklore. Thus, one line of further inquiry might examine the uses of this and other psychoactive mushrooms, irrespective of whether they are ingredients in

beverages, or whether and how they are characterized in folklore. In addition to the ancient references cited above, there may be more modern references—beyond the Russian ethnographic reports cited by Dumézil—as well as more recent observations from current residents.

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Notes

The links below are to resources at Internet Archive.

1. For a summary of the search to identify the mysterious *soma* (which began in modern times already in the late 18th century), see the introduction to our article "[Soma among the Armenians](#)" (2000).

The Nart sagas, which were first collected in the 19th century, developed over a long period, perhaps 1,500 years or more, and retain as folklore some actual practices of the ancient and medieval Scythians, Sarmatians, and Alans. "Giants" appear in some versions; in others, the Narts are clanmembers of the three principal lordly families of the society. For a good review of the history and motifs in the sagas with bibliography, see V. I. Abaev's [Introduction](#), pp. xxix-lxvii, from *Tales of the Narts, Ancient Myths and Legends of the Ossetians*, translated by Walter May, and edited by John Colarusso and Tamiran Salbiev (Princeton, 2016).

Three collections of Nart tales were available to us, designated as follows:

Dirr = **Adolf Dirr**, *Caucasian Folk-Tales*, selected and translated from the originals by Adolf Dirr, translated into English by Lucy Menzies (New York, 1925), Part 3. Nart Sagas, [pp. 183 ff.](#)

Colarusso = **John Colarusso**, *Nart Sagas from the Caucasus* (Princeton, 2002), Circassian, Abaza, Abkhaz, and Ubykh versions. The book is available at Internet Archive (for borrowing only): [Nart Sagas from the Caucasus](#). For our purposes, the advantage of this work is that it retains the word *sana* as a technical term in the English translation, and so the occurrences of it may be easily located. However, the notes on mythology and folklore, which accompany Colarusso's translation, should be used with caution. See the general and specific [remarks](#) by Armen Petrosyan and Jost Gippert on the subject.

May = *Tales of the Narts, Ancient Myths and Legends of the Ossetians* (Princeton, 2016), translated from Russian by Walter May, edited by John Colarusso and Tamirlan Salbiev. The English translation was made by Walter May for the *Soviet Writer* series, in the late 1940s. Intended for a general

audience, the translation does not retain technical terms, though from the contexts it seems that the available beverages, in addition to wine and beer/ale, included a fermented beverage with honey, which is translated "mead," or "honeyed mead." The book has a glossary (pp. xxi-xxvii) which lists words for several inebriating beverages (though they do not appear in these forms in any of the tales that follow). Among them are:

Aluton, "Ale, mead. Beer, made with honey, strong and inebriating," p. xxii.

Araq, "Unrefined vodka, home-brewed, made from barley, oats, or maize. Root meaning, 'to pour out'," p. xxii.

Rong, "A popular inebriating beverage, frequently mentioned in the Nart tales, customary among the Alans, and to some extent surviving among the Svans (Georgia) today. It is fermented and mixed with honey," p. xxv.

In any case, none of the references in this edition appears to be describing an *entheogen*. See also note 2 below for examples.

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Some useful online resources relating to the Nart tales, their physical and cultural environment, and folkloric motifs, and to *Soma/Sana*:

Wikipedia:

[Nart Saga](#)

[Alans](#)

[Alans](#), Google search of Wikipedia.

[Ossetians](#)

[Ossetians](#), Google search of Wikipedia.

[Ambrosia](#)

[Amanita muscaria](#) mushroom
[Soma](#), Google search of Wikipedia.

[Entheogen](#)

Internet Archive:

[Narts](#)

[Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality](#), by R. Gordon Wasson;

Wasson's lead article in [Persephone's Quest](#);

the [writings of Carl A. P. Ruck](#), especially

[Poets, Philosophers, Priests: Entheogens in the Formation of the Classical Tradition](#), and

[Gods and Plants in the Classical World](#);

the [writings of William A. Emboden, Jr.](#), especially

[Art and Artifact as Ethnobotanical Tools in the Ancient Near East with Emphasis on Psychoactive Plants](#).

[Entheogens of the Old World](#), pp. 12-19 of the chart *Plant Hallucinogens: Sacred Elements of Native Societies*, by Richard Evans Schultes and Elmer W. Smith.

Google:

Images:

[Narts](#)

[Amanita muscaria](#) mushroom

General Web Search:

[Narts](#)

Various:

[Ossetic Nartic Tales](#), Digoron Texts collected by Mixal Gardanti, prepared by R. E. Emmerick and Jost Gippert, online at Titus/University of Frankfurt.

At Internet Archive:

[Mythologie arméno-caucasienne et hétito-asianique](#) *répertoire des antiques religions païennes de l'Asie antérieure septentrionale comparées avec le panthéon chamito-sémitique, pélasgo-égéen et hespéro-atlantique*, by Josef Karst (Strasbourg, 1948), in 404 bookmarked and searchable pdf pages.

[Eastern Asia Minor and the Caucasus in Ancient Mythologies](#), by Robert Bedrosian, at Internet Archive. The article describes ancient myths about Asia Minor and the Caucasus, and their motifs.

[Amiran-Darejaniani](#), *a Cycle of Medieval Georgian Tales Traditionally Ascribed to Mose Khoneli*, translated with scholarly notes by R. H. Stevenson (Oxford, 1958), in 267 searchable pdf pages.

[Motif-Index of Folk-Literature](#): *A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1955-1958), in 2497 searchable and bookmarked pdf pages. This essential tool only made use of a few works on Armenian and Georgian folklore, none about the Narts. It is here that some valuable work could be done, to better categorize the motifs of the Nart sagas, and place them among their peers.

[Writings of Stith Thompson](#). These selections from his works are noteworthy not only for their content, but as examples of method.

2. Such are the references in **Colarusso**: Saga 23, p. 117-118, a drinking-horn of *sana*, a vat of *sana*; Saga 34, "they drank *sana*," pp. 162, 167; Saga 84, wine (a beverage distinct from *sana*), containing snake venom as a poison, p. 372.

In **May**: s9. "mead" as a drink, p. 23; s12. "beer," p. 33; s17. Shatana brews "black beer" from "barley corn and a ferment of hops," p. 63 (she discovers this drink); s31. "mead," p. 131, and "black beer," p. 133; s33, "mead," pp. 141-142; s38, Shatana brews honey-mead for a wedding, p. 196; s61. "mead," p. 268; s66, the magical Wasamonga Bowl (which detects liars) contains "beer," and has reptiles at the bottom—a somewhat peculiar motif perhaps indicating a memory of a "magical" beverage, pp. 278-279; s76, both "mead" and "foaming ale" are present at the wedding feast of Asamazh, pp. 320-322.

3. "[Prometheus as Shade-Foot and the Theft of Fire](#)," from *Poets, Philosophers, Priests: Entheogens in the Formation of the Classical Tradition*, by Carl A. P. Ruck, from *Persephone's Quest, Entheogens and the Origins of Religion* (New Haven, 1986), pp. 151-257.

4. Saga 55, **Colarusso**, pp. 216 ff. A literal translation appears in W. Allen, "An Abaza Text," from the journal *Bedi kartlisa*, (1965) 19-20, pp. 159-172.

5. Saga 26, **Colarusso**, pp. 129-130).

6. Saga 48, **Colarusso**, p. 188.

7. Sana as place name: "There is a place called Nart-Sana. Sana of the Narts lived there. Is that the only place where the Narts used to live?" Saga 46, **Colarusso**, p. 184, and elsewhere.

8. Magical red apples: Saga 7, **Colarusso**, pp. 50 ff; also Saga 2, pp. 12 ff; Saga 6, p. 51, and elsewhere. In **May**, s3. pp. 68 ff, "The Apple of the Narts."

9. Moses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, translated from Classical Armenian by Robert W. Thomson (London, 1978), p. 122. Thomson rightly describes the sentence as obscure and provides the opinions of other Armenists, and references to their publications. He concludes (p. 122, note 23) "The usual explanation is that some kind of (magical?) herbs are intended."

There is an extensive literature on Satanaya in various languages, including linguistic material about the name, and folklore-related material about the themes of the stories she appears in. For a summary of some, with additional bibliography, see [Satenik](#), Wikipedia.

In particular, see, at Internet Archive:

Tork Dalalyan's "[On the Character and Name of the Caucasian Satana \(Sat'enik\)](#)," from the journal *Aramazd* 1(2006), pp. 239-253.

Armen Petrosyan's "[Армянская Сатеник/Сатиник и Кавказская Сатана/Сатаней](#) [Armenian Satenik/Satinik and Caucasian Satana/Sataney]," from *Vestnik Vladikavkazskogo nauchnogo tsentra* 16 1(2016), pp. 8-17,

and his "[Հայկական Սաթենիկը և նրա կովկասյան գոլգահեռները](#) [Armenian Sat'enik and Her Caucasian Parallels]," from *Lraber hasarakakan gitut'yunneri [Bulletin of Social Sciences]* (Erevan, Armenia), 2018, No. 3, pp. 310-331.

10. "[Le dit de la princesse Saṭinik](#)," by Georges Dumézil, from the journal *Revue des études arméniennes* 9(1929), pp. 41-53.

See also Abaev's remarks on Movses' information and on Armenian connections in his *Introduction*, *op. cit.*,

[p. liii](#);

[p. lxvi, note 14](#); and

[p. lxvii, note 21](#).

11. "[Little Satana's Wedding Breakfast](#)," by Charles Dowsett, from *Armenian Studies in Memoriam Haig Berberian* (Lisbon, 1986), Dickran Kouymjian, editor, pp. 243-263.

See M. Ananikian's excellent *Armenian Mythology* (Boston, 1925) generally, and specifically on the motif of the dragon-slayer/bringer of fire [pp. 42 ff.](#)

12. *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*, *op.cit.*, [pp.143-147](#).